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Disciplines, Institutions and the Performance-Based Research Fund: The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning from a New Zealand Perspective

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At the heart of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) lies a desire by many in higher education to recognise the centrality of learning and, more particularly, establish teaching as a valid scholarly activity associated with its own epistemology, rigorous methods and peer review process (Kreber, 2007). The role of teaching as a means to facilitate learning is widely recognised through the research literature and institutional policies. SoTL as an emerging field is increasingly diverse although terminology still causes debate (Kreber, 2007).

Despite a lack of clarity, SoTL is characterised by two key themes. Firstly, that SoTL activity must have at its core a desire to improve the quality of learning. For example, through undergraduate student engagement with research-based activities or fundamental curriculum revision following extensive classroom-based investigation (Shulman, 2000).

Secondly, SoTL has become firmly rooted within disciplinary inquiry. Pace (2004), argued that “at the core of this entire project is the realisation that all academic learning is discipline specific and that generic strategies for improving teaching are of limited effectiveness” (p. 4). ISSOTL’s engagement with 25 disciplinary societies in October 2005 was a further illustration of the increasing location of SoTL within disciplinary research paradigms.

Less well understood is the extent to which disciplines and institutions impact on the construction of academic identity particularly as it impacts upon SoTL. Colbeck (1998) found that “faculty members’ opportunities to integrate teaching and research were shaped by the ways expectations for the two roles were defined by their disciplinary, university and department contexts” (p. 664). More recently, Lee proposed that while departments were a “critical unit of analysis in higher education” (p. 42), it was the external forces from discipline and institution that had a powerful effect on departmental perceptions. Interestingly, Lee (2007) found that the institution plays a more influential role than the discipline on departmental perceptions of students, research and professional workload and responsibilities. There are clear implications for SoTL although Lee recognised that the relationship was complex and likely to be affected by factors such as institutional type and disciplinary status. This essay considers the response by disciplines and New Zealand universities to a national research assessment policy with particular reference to SoTL.

In many ways the impact of SoTL has been as profound in New Zealand as elsewhere. There are numerous examples of individuals and collaborative groups working innovatively at institutional and national level to reconceptualize their approach to teaching to the clear benefit of students (e.g. Spronken-Smith and Kingham (2009). However, SoTL has yet to influence institutional decision making (Schroeder, 2007) and it remains vulnerable in the current climate of financial stringency. In the United Kingdom, Lewis Elton (2008) drew attention to the gap between those committed to improvement and those responsible for leading universities. He wrote that the privileging of disciplinary research over SoTL “is strengthened everywhere by features of

marketisation which have increased the importance of management and finance in academia, to the detriment of the really important work of academics with which SoTL is concerned – teaching and research” (p. 1).

In the same paper Elton (2007) also noted the negative impact research assessment exercises (RAE) have on SoTL. He describes the RAE as a “self-inflicted ‘own goal’ of academia which has biased research towards short-termism, and has introduced terms such as ‘research inactive’ to label academic staff who, while engaged in both research and teaching could not satisfy the narrow research definitions of the RAE and came as a result to be labelled ‘research inactive’” (p. 1). New Zealand has its own version of the RAE – the Performance-Based Research Fund. It is this that directly threatens the health of SoTL in the universities.

New Zealand Tertiary Education

New Zealand’s small but diverse tertiary sector has been controlled by successive governments via a tertiary education strategy incorporating tight budgetary management, a number of onerous reporting requirements and detailed national indicators. For almost 10 years Government funded initiatives have sought to reinforce tertiary sector unity and have (in a small way) supported an environment not obviously hostile to SoTL. These initiatives include the National Tertiary Teaching Excellence Awards which recognize scholarly teaching and in 2006 Ako Aotearoa (National Centre for Tertiary Teaching Excellence) was established with a modest government grant to improve the quality of teaching and learning in all tertiary organizations and to encourage teaching related research (e.g. a collaborative inquiry based learning project jointly located in three Universities and an Institute of Technology together with several projects designed to improve the learning outcomes of Maori students).

Historically, the sector has been under-funded and was recently dealt a ‘body blow’ (NZVCC, 2009) in the 2009 budget. Interestingly, while cutting back student targeted funding, the budget allocated a significant amount to support disciplinary research. In addition, the PBRF was increased by a modest amount. While this support demonstrates a commitment to research, science and technology, the disciplinary based and inquiry focused nature of this funding will do little to encourage SoTL.

At first glance, New Zealand Universities are well placed to provide leadership in implementing SoTL initiatives. They have the backing of the Education Act (1989) which requires that degree level courses are ‘taught mainly by people engaged in research’ and that ‘research and teaching are closely interdependent’. Furthermore, the New Zealand Academic Audit Unit (established in 1994) regularly conducts audits to ensure that universities provide high quality learning and teaching. Cycle 3 (completed in 2006) assessed teaching quality, program delivery and the achievement of learning outcomes. The earlier round (completed in 2001) included an explicit examination of the teaching-research nexus. The results led the then AAU Director to optimistically claim that “these initiatives give cause for optimism about the future development and implementation of the teaching research link.” (Woodhouse, 2001 p. 13). However, a detailed analysis of institutional self-review material and review reports indicated little was being done to use an increased understanding of the nexus to improve student learning (Willis, 2001).

Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF)

The PBRF illustrates how a national policy designed to enhance the quality of research in the broadest sense has been interpreted by disciplinary experts and institutions in ways that run counter to the development of an inclusive view of research and in particular stunted the growth of SoTL. This context has kept SoTL on the margins as the preserve of academic developers and a minority of enthusiasts outside the realm of university decision makers.

The PBRF marked a shift from a comprehensive funding model to one that divided resources between a capped student component and a modestly increasing research fund. This effectively meant that increases in research funding (as defined by PBRF criteria) came at the expense of investment in teaching.

The reputational benefits attached to PBRF success are high for individuals and institutions. All the more so since the forthcoming round in 2012 may be the last in its current form thereby locking in university rankings.

The assessment exercise began in 2003 with the primary intention of encouraging universities to “increase the average quality of research” but also to ensure that “research continues to support degree and postgraduate teaching” (Tertiary Education Committee [TEC], 2004 p. 16). A second partial round was conducted in 2006. The funding model comprises three elements: external research income, postgraduate research degree completions, and most significant in terms of funding weighting (60%) – periodic quality evaluations (ibid. p. 16)

The quality evaluation has had a profound impact on the research of individuals. Unlike the RAE in the UK, each faculty member (who teaches and/or researches at more than 0.2 FTE) is required to submit an evidence portfolio (EP) identifying their four most significant research outputs (NROs) over a six year period. They must also list examples of peer esteem (e.g. prizes, speaking invitations) and contributions to the research environment (e.g. research student supervision, grants). The greatest weight is placed on the research outputs (70%). The quality of the EP is judged by a panel of national and international disciplinary experts who assign a grade of A, B, C or the ‘research inactive’ R). The process is rigorous, time consuming and expensive. It allows for referral of EPs across the 12 panels and is extensively moderated. Grades are strictly private although managers are notified of an individual’s results.

A sliding scale of funding is attached to each grade. These scores are aggregated to produce the inevitable league tables for units, disciplines and the ultimate prize of ‘top’ research university. Data spin and game playing has been rife particularly in the 2006 partial round (Adams, 2008). Disciplines such as engineering and medicine are allocated the highest level of funding. This ranking clearly serves to reinforce existing disciplinary hierarchies.

The TEC guidelines define research as “original investigation undertaken in order to gain knowledge and understanding” (ibid. p. 22). A set of 10 principles governing the PBRF include “comprehensiveness which is designed to appropriately measure the quality of the full range of original investigative activity that occurs within the sector, regardless of its type, form or place of output” (ibid, p. 16). So far so good for SoTL... However, the evaluations of quality are also expected to meet the principle of “consistency across the different subject areas and in the calibration of quality ratings against international standards of excellence” (ibid p. 16).

An ‘A’ researcher is defined as follows:

“Leadership and accomplishment exemplified by a platform of world class research, including highly original work ranking with the best of its kind and characterised by qualities such as intellectual and creative advance, important new findings with wider implications, intellectual rigour, imaginative insight or methodological skill, substantial impact or uptake and dissemination through most appropriate and best channels” (ibid p. 40).

Given such an inquiry based interpretation of research quality it is not surprising to find heavy representation of more traditional and quantitative disciplines in the 2003 top 10 ranked subjects. Languishing at the bottom of the 2003 list were Education, Design and Nursing.

What are the implications for SoTL in NZ universities? Of course, an established faculty member with a full EP can afford to diversify into SoTL. For mid- and especially early career academics the risks are greater. They must firstly ensure that they have a coherent research platform consistent with PBRF definitions and panel interpretations and secondly support it with high quality disciplinary based publications. SoTL publications may be cross referred to the Education assessment panel. The members of which are likely to draw on their social science research expertise. While PBRF rewards faculty members for supervising research students, other teaching related activities are specifically excluded in the TEC definition of research (p. 22). Publications such as text books are of little PBRF value.

The TEC has yet to finalise the details of the 2012 round and has undertaken extensive consultation on a range of issues identified during their evaluation process, including a consideration of the impact of unintended consequences (Adams, 2008). The Adams report made little reference to teaching or learning. In fact he concluded that “there has been a desirable rebalancing from a system that over-emphasised teaching effort while marginalising research” (p. 8). Of interest here are his findings that the disciplinary panels appeared to follow the guidelines too rigidly and “should be more sophisticated in comparing sub-disciplines; considering applied and policy led work and assessing practise outcomes as well as academic outcomes” (p. 65). This has created a hierarchy within as well as between disciplines.

Adams also found an undue focus on staff with established track records and a narrow range of outputs (i.e. high impact journals). However, he appears to underestimate the reputational value of the PBRF which far outweighs its financial rewards when he suggests that work falling outside the academic science model should more appropriately seek alternative funding.

Institutional practice has also been shaped by the PBRF. Universities have been quick to develop their research infrastructure, increase research grant funding and postgraduate scholarships, modify appraisal and promotion practices and selectively reward high (or potentially high) PBRF performers. Again the focus is increasingly falling on strategies to develop traditional forms of disciplinary research.

Conclusion

The PBRF process has reinforced a narrowing of perceptions of research in New Zealand where scholarship is concerned mostly about inquiry (Boyer, 1990). The disciplinary based panels have embraced this enthusiastically which has led to a reinforcing of traditional academic roles.

This has culminated in a failure all round to more adequately acknowledge research located *within* disciplines. SoTL is becoming increasingly invisible and even more likely to be defined within the social science parameters of educational research as the preserve of those educators interested in questions of learning and teaching in higher education and academic developers keen to promote change. Under a PBRF regime those within a diverse range of disciplines will be discouraged from bringing their theories and methods to bear on teaching problems in ways that make sense to them and to their students.

In NZ the PBRF driven tide may eventually turn when the Government becomes interested in teaching quality. This inevitably risks the imposition of indicators that have little if anything to do with teaching or learning. However, this may open an opportunity to re-engage policy makers with 'evidence-based' discussions that place the results of SoTL at the centre of decision making (Shulman, 2000). Institutionally this dialogue can include SoTL advocates participating in policy development and operating within the structure of institutional planning processes (Schroeder, 2007).

As ever the path ahead will be a long and difficult one. I hope that it will lead to an increased emphasis on engagement with "broader agendas and consider questions relating to the larger learning experience of students" (Kreber, 2007 p. 1).

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